

So you want to do a time capsule?

by Ivan Hanthorn, for the Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium

Tips to Keep in Mind While Trying to Defeat Time

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The irrepressible urge to create a time capsule commemorating new or renovated buildings or other community activity is still an active social formula despite contrary claims of logic and ample evidence of frequent failure. This "buried treasure syndrome", as it has been termed by one author, overlooks the deterioration effects of time on materials overall and in the extremely adverse conditions of a time capsule in particular. Alternatives to the traditional "entombed" time capsule such as a bank box or sealed archival housing would increase the probability of materials surviving to the intended date of disclosure. However, if a time capsule seems an appropriate and desirable under-taking for your group or community, the following tips are offered to assist you in achieving your objective. There are three principal concerns to address: the physical quality of the materials you select for inclusion in the time capsule, the structure of the time capsule, and documentation of the contents and location.

Tip #1—Establish a selection preference for books and documentation printed on the highest quality paper. Newspapers and similar low quality paper items are highly acidic and quickly deteriorate as well as contribute to the deterioration of other items in the capsule. Newspapers and similar quality materials should be photocopied onto archival quality paper to insure longevity.

Tip #2—Photographs are wonderful information carriers across time and culture. Black and white photos are much more stable than color prints. Use black and white if at all possible. To keep photo emulsion surfaces from sticking together, interleave the photos or sleeve them with archival quality photo envelopes.

Send your preservation questions to:

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Tip #3—Enclose each item in an archival quality envelope, folder, or other appropriate container, or wrap each item in acid-free tissue. Labeling these enclosures in pencil would be useful to the intended future audience.

Tip #4—If selected paper materials present acidity problems, deacidification may be appropriate. Although easily applied spray deacidification products are available through preservation specialty catalogs (e.g., Wei T'O and Bookkeeper), it would be advisable to consult with a professional conservator.

Tip #5—Select a container that is non-rusting, leak proof, and durable. Burial vaults have an obvious track record and are the most commonly used containers. Commercial time capsule products are available, but budget and space often drive the decision for local fabrication. Polypropylene, aluminum, and stainless steel are currently considered as acceptable capsule structure materials. Seals are critical; butyl or propylene gaskets are currently favored.

Tip #6—Include items that do not require any technology or equipment other than the eye and hand to use and interpret. Today's computer discs and similar electronic media will not be playable in the future.

Tip #7—Document the time capsule. Label the outside of the capsule clearly with a permanent material; create a checklist of the contents in duplicate (one copy for the time capsule enclosure and one file copy); and insure that a record of the time capsule along with the contents list is kept in several places.

Tip #8—Avoid plastics. Because the aging characteristics of some plastics are not good and others are not truly known, these materials cannot be counted upon to survive in their original form. This problem is compounded if a plastic object is the medium for information (as with CD's or video tapes).

If you have questions about this tip sheet or other preservation topics, contact:

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